

Barnett, David. *A History of the Berliner Ensemble*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 507 pp. £58.00. ISBN 978-1-107-05979-5.

With his account of the Berliner Ensemble (BE) between 1949 and 1999 David Barnett does not only present a meticulously researched study but also – and perhaps surprisingly – the first scholarly account in any language of this important and ground-breaking theatre. In the process Barnett successfully challenges some perceived wisdoms. For example, he portrays the BE as a dynamic institution – a term rarely used to describe the theatre post 1956 although Barnett admits to a stalemate after 1966 relating to the “millstone of Brecht’s reputation” (p. 3). Barnett also usefully places the BE in the context of East Germany and illustrates the complicated relationship between the company and the regime. What is particularly noteworthy is the focus on Brecht’s practical work in the theatre, a focus which has too often been missing in Brecht studies. The book’s first chapter and its discussion of Brecht’s ideas concerning the “thinking actor”, collaborative processes, dialogue and education lays the groundwork in this respect and becomes a reference point for the following discussion.

Overall Barnett uses a chronological structure for his book. This makes sense particularly because of the number of significant caesuras in the company’s history, e.g. Brecht’s death in 1956, the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, Weigel’s death in 1971, etc. Barnett’s contextual approach also allows him to illustrate the difficult negotiations between the BE and other theatres (such as the Deutsches Theater in the early days, chapters 2 and 3), the constant pressure from

the SED regime and its different agencies (which could vary, however, and was contingent on outside factors such as the 1968 Prague Spring [pp. 211-215]), the BE's relationship with the West (e.g. pp. 174-176), or the dealings with the Brecht estate (e.g. pp. 289-292, 298-300, 320-322).

Although as a distinguished Brecht scholar Barnett acknowledges Brecht's crucial role this book is not a monument to him or the company he created. The aesthetic challenges and crisis years are discussed in detail (e.g. in chapters 7, 9, and 11). The fact that the BE seemed so closely aligned to the GDR in the late 1970s and 1980s (pp. 309-314) meant that the company found it difficult to find a critical voice just before, during and after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. And the various attempts at running the theatre with a five man directorship or its turning into a limited company more or less failed disastrously in the early to mid 1990s (chapter 13).

Barnett has written a passionate study about one of the most distinctive theatre companies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The way he interweaves the text with short discussions of the research context or particular positions he wants to challenge – without relying on a separate chapter – is fascinating. Although possibly depressing given the earlier history of the BE Barnett is certainly right in claiming that today – and with the arrival of Frank Castorf – the theatre has become “simply one of a number of Berlin theatres that staged plays by Bertolt Brecht” (p. 434).

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